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AUTHOR Tolan, Stephanie
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ABSTRACT

This digest provides parents of highly or profoundly gifted children with practical suggestions based on the experience of other parents and the modest amount of research available. Parents are encouraged to understand that such children are significantly different from other children and have two primary needs: to feel comfortable with themselves and to develop their astonishing potential. Suggestions are given for dealing with public attitudes toward exceptional performance in very young children and for dealing with the multiple developmental ages the gifted child may exhibit simultaneously. Problems of schooling the highly gifted child are discussed in terms of lack of fit with the usual school, the various possibilities of acceleration for this type of child, and ways to help the gifted child meet his or her social/emotional needs. Stressed is the importance of providing the child with a safe home in which the child feels loved and accepted. Includes 18 references. (DB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children
THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN
1920 Association Drive • Reston, VA 22091-1589
FAX (703) 264-9494

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HELPING YOUR HIGHLY GIFTED CHILD

Most parents greet the discovery that their child is not merely gifted but *highly* or *profoundly* gifted with a combination of pride, excitement, and fear. They may set out to find experts or books to help them cope with raising such a child, only to find that there are no real experts, only a couple of books, and very little understanding of extreme intellectual potential and how to develop it. This digest deals with some areas of concern and provides a few practical suggestions based on the experience of other parents and the modest amount of research available.

Differences

To understand highly gifted children it is essential to realize that, although they are children with the same basic needs as other children, they are very different. Adults cannot ignore or gloss over their differences without doing serious damage to these children, for the differences will not go away or be outgrown. They affect almost every aspect of these children's intellectual and emotional lives.

A microscope analogy is one useful way of understanding extreme intelligence. If we say that all people look at the world through a lens, with some lenses cloudy or distorted, some clear, and some magnified, we might say that gifted individuals view the world through a microscope lens and highly gifted individuals view it through an electron microscope. They see ordinary things in very different ways and often see what others simply cannot see. Although there are advantages to this heightened perception, there are disadvantages as well.

Since many children eventually become aware of being different, it is important to prepare yourself for your child's reactions. When your child's giftedness has been identified, you might open a discussion using the microscope analogy. If you are concerned that such a discussion will promote arrogance, be sure to let the child know that unusual gifts, like hair and eye color, are not earned. It is neither admirable nor contemptible to be highly gifted. It is what one does with one's abilities that is important.

A United Front

As in most other aspects of parenting, it is important for both parents (or the adults who bear primary responsibility for raising the child) to agree on some basic issues regarding the child's potential. Some parents of exceptionally gifted children were themselves gifted or exceptionally gifted children. If they did not learn to accept and understand their own giftedness, they may find it difficult to accept their child's unusual capacities. Raising a highly gifted child may help parents come to terms with many difficult aspects of their own lives, but it helps if they focus first on the needs of the child and come to an agreement about how to meet them.

What Highly Gifted Children Need

Exceptionally gifted children have two primary needs. First, they need to feel comfortable with themselves and with the differences that simultaneously open possibilities and create difficulty. Second, they need to develop their astonishing potential. There is a strong internal drive to develop one's abilities. Thwarting that drive may lead to crippling emotional damage. Throughout the parenting years, it is wise to keep in mind that the healthiest long-term goal is not necessarily a child who gains fame, fortune, and a Nobel Prize, but one who becomes a comfortable adult and uses gifts productively.

The Early Years

Before your child begins formal schooling, differences can be handled by your willingness to follow the child's lead and meet needs as they arise. It is possible and important to treat an infant's or toddler's precocity with a degree of normalcy. For example, a 2-year-old who prefers and plays appropriately with toys designed for 6-year-olds should be given those toys. The 3-year-old who reads should be given books. The child who speaks very early and with a sophisticated vocabulary should be spoken to in kind.

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Public Attitudes

Even when parents can take precocious achievements in stride, friends, family, and strangers may not. Unthinking people will comment (often loudly and in front of the child) that a 2- or 3-year-old who sits in the grocery cart reading packages aloud is a phenomenon.

It may be surprisingly difficult to avoid letting parental pride lure you into encouraging your child to "perform" in public. Keep in mind the goal of making the child as comfortable as possible with individual differences. The more casually you accept unusual early accomplishments, the more your child will be able to see those accomplishments as normal. Later, when gifts are no longer quite as noticeable, the child will not feel that what made him or her valuable has somehow been lost.

Multiple Ages

Highly gifted children are many ages simultaneously. A 5-year-old may read like a 7-year-old, play chess like a 12-year-old, talk like a 13-year-old, and share toys like a 2-year-old. A child may move with lightning speed from a reasoned discussion of the reasons for taking turns on the playground to a full-scale temper tantrum when not allowed to be first on the swing. You can help yourself maneuver among the child's ages by reading about developmental norms (Gesell is a good guide) so that you are ready for (and avoid punishing) behavior that, although it seems childish in a precocious child, is absolutely age appropriate.

School

If your 9-month-old begins speaking in full sentences, you probably will not tell the child to stop and wait till other 9-month-olds catch up. You would not limit such a child to using nouns because that is as much speech as most 9-month-olds can handle. However, in public or private school that may be the approach some educators use.

It is important to realize that they are not purposely setting out to keep your child from learning, although that might be the effect. Many educators have never knowingly dealt with a highly gifted child. They do not recognize them, and they do not know how to handle them. Some educators base teaching methods on developmental norms that are inappropriate for highly gifted children. Although they may be willing to make an effort to accommodate these youngsters, they may lack sufficient information or experience and not know what type of effort to make.

When a child enters school already able to do what the teacher intends to teach, there is seldom a variety of mechanisms for teaching that child something else. Even if there were a way to provide time, attention, and an appropriate curriculum, it would be necessary for the teacher to use different teaching methods. Highly gifted children learn not only faster than others, but also differently. Standard teaching methods take complex subjects and break them into small, simple bits presented one at a time. Highly gifted minds can consume large amounts of information in a single gulp, and they thrive on complexity. Giving these children simple bits of information is like feeding an elephant one blade of grass at a time—he will starve before he even realizes that anyone is trying to feed him.

When forced to work with the methods and pace of a typical school, highly gifted children may look not *more* capable than their peers, but *less* capable. Many of their normal characteristics add to this problem. Their handwriting might be very messy because their hands do not keep pace with their quick minds. Many spell poorly because they read for comprehension and do not see the words as collections of separate letters. When they try to "sound out" a word, their logical spelling of an illogical language results in errors. Most have difficulty with rote memorization, a standard learning method in the early grades.

Lack of Fit

The difficulty with highly gifted children in school may be summarized in three words: *They don't fit.* Almost all American schools organize groups of children by age. As we have seen, the highly gifted child is many ages. The child's intellectual needs might be years ahead of same-age peers, although the gulf may be larger in some subject areas than in others.

Imagine 6-year-old Rachel. She reads on a 12th-grade level, although her comprehension is "only" that of a 7th grader. She does multiplication and division, understands fractions and decimals, but counts on her fingers because she has never memorized addition and subtraction facts or multiplication tables. Her favorite interests at home are paleontology and astronomy; at school her favorite interests are lunch and recess. She collects stamps and plays chess. Although she can concentrate at her telescope for hours at a time, she cannot sit still when she is bored. She cries easily, loses her temper often, bosses other children when they "don't do it right," and cannot keep track of her personal belongings. She has a sophisticated sense of humor that disarms adults but is not understood by other children.

Putting Rachel into a regular first grade without paying special attention to her differences is a recipe for social, emotional, and educational disaster. Even if a gifted program is available (they commonly begin in third or fourth grade), it is unlikely to meet her extreme needs.

Educating a highly gifted child in school is like clothing a 6X child in a store where the largest available garment is a size 3 (or with a gifted program, a 3X). Parents have to resort to alterations or individual tailoring of whatever kind they can manage.

In dealing with school issues, it is important to remember that you know more about your child than anyone else. Your knowledge, information, and instincts are useful and important, and they should be recognized in designing a school program. Your child needs *individual attention*. Anything else may be directly and seriously harmful.

There is no ideal school pattern for the highly gifted child. However, when normal school patterns lead to difficulty, it is important to obtain real differentiation.

Acceleration

Because highly gifted children may begin school already knowing much of the material covered in early grades and because they learn quickly, some type of acceleration is necessary. For some children and in some situations, grade skipping is the best choice. Placing a child with older children who share interests may be socially and intellectually beneficial and result in a more appropriate curriculum. It is also a simple and economical solution for the school. Some children begin school early; others skip several early grades; others skip whole educational levels, such as junior high or even high school. Skipping a single year is seldom helpful, because the difference between one grade level and the next is too small. Grade skipping is not without problems, but allowing highly gifted children to stay in a class that meets few if any of their needs may do serious and long-term damage.

Another type of acceleration is subject matter acceleration. A child may take mathematics with a class four grades ahead, reading with a class two grades ahead, and physical education with age peers. This type of acceleration takes into consideration the varying developmental ages of the highly gifted child. For further flexibility, you might consider evening classes or weekend classes at a high school or college and ask the school to excuse coverage of those subjects in regular classes. A child might go to school with age mates only in the morning or only in the afternoon. This method calls for school and parent flexibility and may lead to logistical problems with scheduling and transportation, but it is often more satisfactory than grade skipping, because the child associates at least part of the time with age peers.

When the School Will Not Change

When parents approach teachers and administrators with information and documentation, in a spirit of cooperation rather than confrontation, offering suggestions and help rather than attacking, some positive changes in normal methods usually result. Sometimes, however, schools refuse to make changes for one child. When this happens, parents have few choices. One is to move to a school system that *will* make changes. Another is home schooling.

For many highly gifted children home schooling is a nearly ideal solution to the problem of fit. Instead of laboriously altering ready-made programs, parents can tailor an education precisely to the child's needs. Clubs, sports, scouting, and other activities supply social interaction with other children while parents serve as teachers or facilitators or engage tutors or mentors in various subject areas.

Home schooling is seldom an easy choice. In some districts it is either illegal or beset with regulations that make it almost as rigid as classroom schooling. When both parents or the single resident parent must work, it may be impossible. Some parents and children find the level of togetherness stifling, while others cannot avoid pushing and demanding too much. However, home schooling may be a positive choice for many families. Many children move surprisingly smoothly from home schooling in the early years into high school or college when their intellectual needs outgrow the home environment. One of the major benefits of education at home is the maintenance of self-esteem, which is highly problematic in a school environment.

Social/Emotional Needs

In the movie *E.T.* there was something heartrending in the small alien's attempts to "phone home," in his constant longing for others of his kind despite the loving concern of the family who cared for him. Highly gifted children endure some of that same pain. It is hard for them to find kindred spirits, hard for them to feel they fit into the only world they know.

Highly gifted children may have trouble establishing fulfilling friendships with people of their own age when there are few or no other highly gifted children with whom to interact. As a high school student told his mother, "I can be that part of myself that is like my classmates, and we get along fine. But there's no one I can share the rest of me with, no one who understands what means the most to me." For most highly gifted children, social relationships with age peers necessitate a constant monitoring of thoughts, words, and behavior.

One of the greatest benefits of the talent searches proliferating in colleges across the country is the chance for highly gifted children to spend time with others like themselves. For 3 weeks in the summer, children who qualify (by scoring high enough on the SAT or ACT in the seventh grade or earlier) attend class on a college campus with other highly gifted children. Rather than feeling like oddballs, they sud-

denly feel normal. Lifelong friendships may form in a matter of days. Many summer program participants consider the social interaction as valuable as the classes.

What else can you do to help highly gifted children find friends? It helps children to understand that there are different types of friends. They may play baseball, ride bikes, and watch TV with one person; talk about books or movies with another; and play chess or discuss astronomy with another. Some of these friends may be their own age, some may be younger or, more often, older. Only in school is it suggested that people must be within a few months of each other in age to form meaningful relationships.

Conclusion

Raising a highly gifted child may be ecstasy, agony, and everything between. Adults must perform almost impossible feats of balance—supporting a child's gifts without pushing, valuing without overinvesting, championing without taking over. It is costly, physically and emotionally draining, and intellectually demanding. In the first flush of pride, few parents realize that their task is in many ways similar to the task faced by parents of a child with severe handicaps. Our world does not accommodate differences easily, and it matters little whether the difference is perceived to be a deficit or an overabundance.

We have covered only a few issues in this space, but the most important help you can give highly gifted children can be expressed in a single sentence: Give them a safe home, a refuge where they feel love and genuine acceptance, even of their differences. As adults with a safe home in their background, they can put together lives of productivity and fulfillment.

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